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SUBJECT: IRISH IRAQIS "KEEPING THE FAITH" FOR IRAQI SUCCESS

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Summary

11. Summary. On March 7, the Ambassador hosted a dinner for Irish Iraqi Shia Muslims and select members of the Irish government and press to assist the Shia community in developing a voice to counter the continued Irish anti-war rhetoric. The Imam of the Shia community, Dr. Ali Al Saleh told the Ambassador that the American-led invasion of Iraq prompted a 'miraculous' changing of Iraqi mentality. He asked that the USG proceed slowly and fairly with its treatment of the new Iraqi government, and be careful not to ostracize the majority Shia population. He also said that the West's fears of Iraqi Shia allegiance to Tehran are unfounded; instead, when the Iraqi Shias are once more empowered, Tehran will look to Iraq for leadership. End summary.

Shia Muslim Dialogue

12. On March 7, the Ambassador hosted a dinner for Irish Iraqi Shia Muslims and select members of the Irish government and press. The purpose of the event was to bring Irish officials and media together with the Shia community. The Shia community in Ireland, comprised mostly of Iraqi nationals, is favorably disposed to USG involvement in Iraq and eager to speak publicly on moderate Islamic themes, but struggles to effectively impart to the Irish public the reality, as members see it, of the progress in Iraq. The Ambassador hosted this event to assist the Shia community in raising their profile within the Irish political scene. Irish participants included a representative from the Prime Minister's office, the Department of Foreign Affairs Middle East Deputy Director, the Director of the National Consultative Committee on Racism and Integration and the Foreign Affairs Correspondent for the Irish Times.

Changing Mentality

13. The Imam of the Shia community, Dr. Ali Al Saleh repeated many of the ideas he has expressed to us before. He told the group that the American-led invasion of Iraq prompted a 'miraculous' changing of Iraqi mentality. He said that prior to the invasion, Muslim clerics questioned the compatibility of Islam and democracy. Now, according to the Imam, "you can't have Islam without democracy." He added that since the fall of Saddam Hussein, Iraqis on Saudi Arabian Hajj freely boast about the democratic changes occurring in Iraq. He also added that now Muslims are beginning to ponder the differences between theological Islam and state-led

impositions of culture and tradition, such as in the restrictive public role of women in Saudi Arabia.

¶4. Al Saleh also said that until 2003, Iraqis were raised to hate Israelis. Since the insurgency in Iraq and instances of Palestinian suicide bombers killing innocent Shias in Iraq, the Shia community is developing a sympathy towards the Israelis. Al Saleh said that Iraqis are questioning why they ever aligned themselves with Palestinian 'murderers'.

Keeping the Faith

¶5. Al Saleh told the group that maintaining the faith of the people is crucial for the success of Iraq. He suggested the following as keys to keeping Iraqi confidence:

- An increase in NGOs to teach Iraqis how to nation build.
- An increase in exchange programs with Americans. According to Al Saleh, Iraqis will always distrust governments so the personal touch of people-to-people programs is needed to ensure future partnerships.
- Patience. Al Saleh said that the Iraqi government is too new to withstand rebukes from American or other governments on the current human rights problems in the country. He added when USG Ambassador Khalilzad warned the Shia government officials not to engage in sectarianism, he ostracized the very Shias who were victimized by the sectarianism of the former Sunni government. Al Saleh called for time to train, grow, and make mistakes and learn from them. He also added that the West does not have proprietary rights on human rights and democracy; these are universal values and the Iraqis, in time, will establish a just and transparent governmental system.

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Najaf, the Shia Vatican

¶6. According to Al Saleh, there is nothing to fear from alleged Iraqi Shia alliances with Tehran. Al Saleh said that until the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran, the world's Shias looked to Najaf, Iraq as the Shia Vatican. He added that empowerment of Iraqi Shias will reestablish the influence of Najaf and diminish that of the Iranian government and Hezbollah.

To support this concept he mentioned the following:

- Qom, Iran became a prominent Shia faith center during the time of Saddam Hussein only because Iraqi victims of his persecution fled to Iran.
- Many of Iran's influential leaders (including the now deceased Ayatollah Khomeini) studied Islam in Najaf and maintain loyalties to the holy sites in Iraq.
- To add to the point, Al Saleh mentioned that the most influential Shia leader in Iraq, Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, recently refused to meet with Hezbollah's leader, Hassan Nasrullah.

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